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ABSTRACT

This document considers the position, plight, and needs of recent Central American immigrants to Canada. It seeks to answer three questions: What kind of support do they need? What kind of programs can respond to their needs? How can they be helped to integrate into Canadian society? Several facts are uncovered, and conclusions are reached based on anecdotal information. Among the findings are these: Most of these immigrants come from rural areas in their own countries and have limited or no literacy in their native Spanish. They are often very unfamiliar with what basic appliances are in Canada (e.g., stoves). They encounter significant ethnic and racial-based hostility and prejudice from Canadian citizens. Many untrue and largely negative stereotypes about them are widely believed. Recommendations are made for effectively teaching these immigrants to survive and thrive in Canada. Immigrant success stories are chronicled in a number of vivid examples. It is concluded that the acquisition of literacy skills in Spanish is a necessary first step before acquiring similar literacy in English or French. Literacy is viewed as more than just reading and writing, but a necessary tool for problem solving in every-day life in a modern society. Other useful resources are provided. (KFT)

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DISCUSSION PAPER

VULNERABLE REFUGEES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my love, gratitude and admiration for all the learners who are part of my life in Canada. It was a lucky day when I met all these beautiful people who became part of my family in a new country.

For the past eight years I have been involved and worked with all these learners who, like me, belong to the Third World. This experience has been extremely enlightening and very meaningful to me, because the main focus is to honour and respect the dignity of the individual regardless of his/her political, social, religious and economic status.

OBJECTIVES

To create awareness, among instructors, tutors, teachers, supply teachers, social and community workers, doctors, public health nurses, mental health workers, of the reality of non-English speaking marginalized people who have limited literacy skills in their first language.

To show the impact of First Language Literacy classes for refugees from Central America with non-existence or low level of literacy skills in their native language.

INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, Canada has given opportunities to refugees from Central America to start new lives in this country. Many of them crossed the Mexican border illegally because they could not get a "visa"in their own countries, and then decided to come to Canada and make a refugee claims at the Buffalo or Detroit borders.

These people were forced to leave their countries because they faced repression and because they lost their families during the war. Painful experiences traumatized them and now they need to settle, integrate and be part of the main stream Canadian society.

Having worked with them since 1993 makes me ask a number of questions:

1-What kind of support do they need?
2-What kind of programs can respond to their needs?
3-How can we help them to integrate in this society when they are not able to understand the system and therefore remain silent voices in Canada?

We need programs to empower these people so they can face the challenges they find in this society during the process of starting a new life in Canada. These adults are not always understood because of their experiences in their home countries. Because of their very limited literacy skills people think they are unable to learn. These attitudes contribute to misunderstandings and to lack of support they need to fully participate in Canadian society. When we do not understand people, we often resort to negative stereotypes and discrimination.

The following cases support the idea expressed above.

* There was a man who liked to visit parks and ride his bicycle and to practice his English, but he always felt very bad because the people around him were afraid of him. He thought that maybe it was because of his "strong" Spanish accent.

* A family was looking for an apartment for more than one year. However, they never found anything good because they identified themselves as Latin-Americans. For that reason they decided to identify themselves as people from Spain because they found out that some landlords turned down Latin American people.

* A man looking for a job decided to go to a small town. Some employers there asked him where he was from. As soon as he named his country of origin they said they did not have a job for him. One of them told him that his compatriots could only solve disagreements by using a machete.

What problems do they face in this country?

Many of them feel sad because they have not been able to achieve their goals. Some of them returned to their countries of origin, but they have come back to Canada because they do not want to live in fear any more.

They feel very frustrated because they cannot use public transportation. They do not know how to use a map.

They do not know how to have fun because when they were children they had to work all the time and now that they are in Canada they need to learn the concept of what "leisure" means.

Some of them are abused by their bosses (harassment in the workplace). They do not fight back because they are afraid of losing their jobs.

Sexually abused women do not report a crime (rape) because they feel weak and afraid to fight back in this society.

Others are being abused by some salespersons who push them to purchase things they do not need. Some people have received calls in Spanish telling them they have won a prize. Afterwards, they are persuaded to take their pictures at no cost. But when they receive the pictures they are asked to pay between $100 - $200 if they want all the pictures. The person who comes to their home with the pictures speaks only English, and if they do not want to pay the amount asked, he threatens to call the police. The salesperson knows that the people are afraid and they do not want to have anything to do with the police.

Some parents feel lonely because their children have learned how live on their own, and are busy making a living for their new families. These parents constantly need someone who can read letters and to complete forms for them and to accompany them to places for medical reasons such as tests or appointments.

In the E.S.L. programs, they experience a lot of pressure because there is a cultural gap between a marginalized person with limited literacy skills from an under-developed country and a person with schooling who was born in a developed country.

These adults have a very hard time integrating in this society because they have reduced options. The decision making is out of their hands. Their children or friends have to make decisions for them. Their opinions are not being listened to because other people speak for them.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDENTS

This discussion paper draws on the experiences of refugees who are in the Spanish First Language Literacy Program at the *Canadian Multilingual Literacy Centre* (C.M.L.C.), in Toronto.

Most of the students in the Spanish Literacy program are from Central America. A few of them are from South America and some are from the Caribbean. They entered Canada with non-existent or low level of literacy skills in their native language. The Roman alphabet is common to both Spanish and English.

The students range in age from approximately 18 to 65. They have a large range of literacy levels. Some of them are unable to read and write in their own language, some cannot distinguish a vowel from a consonant, and others can read fairly well.

Before they came to Canada many of them had small land plots and they were able to support their families. Others worked in agriculture on bigger farms. Many had to leave their homes in order to save their lives. In order to survive they moved to small towns or cities and started small businesses such as small shops for peasants. Others less fortunate had to manage their businesses in public markets selling vegetables which they carried in baskets on their heads. Some children had to help their parents sell food in public markets. Women mainly had to stay at home taking care of their children. However, some of them worked washing clothes for people while the oldest children looked after their brothers and sisters.

Traditions

Women have a very hard time attending E.S.L. literacy classes because their culture demands that women have to do everything in their homes, regardless of whether they live in their own country or here. They must look after their children and home responsibilities. They have to deal with housing, shopping, government application forms and family problems. They feel isolated because here they do not have an extended family who can help them.

Politics

Some refugees came to Canada hating people who belonged to the left wing. They learnt this attitude from the propaganda made by people in power. This attitude of hatred is transferred to other minority groups in their dealings with them. It is difficult for them to identify themselves as a minority group in Canada. They believe that they were never marginalized in their countries of origin.

THEIR ABILITIES

Their best ability is their overwhelming capacity to love and share.

They are great storytellers.

They have knowledge of planting, harvesting and marketing. Some of them worked in the agricultural field, some of them as a gardener, others in the farm industry.

They have experience and expertise in selling. They can manage a small business, such as in public markets. They were street vendors. They can add and subtract mentally.

During political conflict in Central America between the guerrillas, soldiers and paramilitary groups, peasant families were especially targeted. However, they managed to deal with all those groups in order to save their lives. Furthermore, they managed to emigrate to Canada to stop this ordeal. During this process they demonstrated strong survival skills

They have all the necessary potential and they want to take control of their own lives. The only thing they need is to have the opportunity to learn the skills they need to do so.

THEIR CURRENT SITUATION

Some families that I know feel guilty for living in Canada while the rest of their relatives live in a poor country. To overcome this feeling they decide to send money to their relatives. When they use private couriers they pay a lot more money than they would at the Post Office. Because they send so much money to their relatives, their children in Canada do not have enough food to eat.

In Canada they live in overcrowded conditions in order to save money. I remember one of the learners telling me that when her husband became sick he needed an operation. After he left the hospital, he had to sleep with her in the kitchen with three other people. When he needed to go to the bathroom he had to walk carefully so that he did not step on the three people who were sleeping on the floor. They made all these sacrifices to save money to sponsor their six children to Canada.

HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT FROM OTHER LITERACY STUDENTS?

It is important to do research about the population I am working with, because there is no research to confirm the reality of this population. However, from my point of view people from rural areas have more need for first language literacy programs than people who came to Canada sponsored by the Canadian government.

I saw them in their places where they come from, their homes. They lived in relative peace with nature, with their families and they had their own ideology about the universe. They have a natural wisdom.

Many of them were very poor, and they believed that a rich person was the one who had two cows and a brick house. They made their business transactions orally, nothing was in writing.

Sometimes they do not know when they were born or what name is on their birth certificate. Many times they have decided for themselves what day is their birthday. I remember a nice learner "David" who told me that when he claimed his refugee status at the border, the official asked him for his marital status, he answered, " widower", because his wife did not come with him, and for him his wife was "dead", even though she was still alive. After living in Canada for five years, he realized he had made a mistake, but he did not know what to do.

Another example is about learners who found employment. Two learners went to work on a farm. Three days later they returned to Toronto. They said they did not know how to use the stove, and they felt too worried to operate it because it used gas and they did not understand the words "on"and "off". They starved for three days. When they came back to Toronto their settlement counsellor blamed them for trying to take advantage of the system. C.M.L.C. took their cases and explained to them how the system worked and registered them in the First Language Literacy program. After a while they found a job. The companies they work for have phoned C.M.L.C. asking for more referrals.

"Maria" brought a book in Spanish to our class that she was interested in reading because she wanted to learn how to improve her reading comprehension. The book had several articles. One that she was interested in talked about Greek Mythology. Every day, I had to type in big letters the stories of the book and I had to change the vocabulary into plain language. One day, she told me that it was difficult for her to understand the short story I had typed. I suggested to her to read the short story over again and she told me that she had already read it eight times. She also mentioned that she had understood every single word, but she had not understood the message of the story.

I asked her why, and she replied that maybe it was because I had made a mistake in typing the story, since the story talked about many gods and she claimed that she only knew one God. Then, I asked her if she knew about Greek Mythology and she said "no". Then I asked her if when she watched "Xena the Warrior Princess" she believed these people with great powers were fiction or reality. She said, "reality". Maria watched that program with her children believing those stories were real, while her children knew it was fiction.

"Carlos" found out about the First Language program and came to talk with me. When he told me that he was in Level III in another school. I said to him that I could not help him because he was too high for my Level I. He also told me the way he dealt with the English language. First he would listen to people who spoke English to him and then he would answer the question. He knew if everything was OK because of the body language of the person he was talking to. However, at the end of the conversation, he did not know what the person had asked him, and he did not know what he had answered. It was hard for me to believe him but I agreed to keep him in class on a trial basis. While he was in class, I found out that he did not know how to conjugate a verb, he did not know the present, past and future tenses. After I taught him the tenses, the use of the capital letters, to understand letter-sound correspondence, to distinguish different shapes of letters, leaving spaces between words, etc. he was promoted to Level II. At present he has finished level IV and he has joined the Job Search Program. Carlos needed to learn pre-literacy basics before moving to the next level.

Obstacles learners encounter in becoming part of the mainstream Canadian society.

Some learners from Central America need to discover that justice and human rights is our right as human beings. Here in Canada people take for granted the right to life but in our countries only a few have the right to decide who lives or who dies at gun point. So these learners need to consider the right to life as a universal right!

They come with their own baggage of values, cultural and political issues, and this baggage hinders their learning process, because they classify the new information only as good or bad.

Here in Canada, the word "goal" does not make any sense to them, because everything that surrounds them is very foreign and they need enough time to digest the system and to decide what they want to do.

Many times, people working in the mental health field provide services to refugees in the same way that they provide services to the main stream of our society. The learners we are referring to are forced, to a certain extent, to be part of a routine that is completely foreign to them.

Mass media blame poor people, especially immigrants, for their situation. They say that immigrants come to Canada to live on social assistance. They question why the government gives them the opportunity to live here and to study here when in fact some Canadians hate them.

The Canadian system does not allow enough time for the refugees to develop the life skills they need. They are pushed to learn just enough oral English to find a job as soon as possible. But when they are laid off they find out that they also need to read and write English in order to find another job.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ways to teach

Here are some things we do when I teach:

When one of the learners learns something new, it is a very powerful moment of discovery for her or him and for the rest of the class. It is very powerful because the rest of the class benefits from the learning process this particular learner has gone through when he/she shares with them his/her learning process. And, in addition, the learner becomes the instructor which empowers him/her.

They have told me they feel very comfortable when they are writing. They think that is the best way to learn how to read. They love to write words by dictation.

Sometimes the students make changes in how some classroom activities should be done, according to their needs.

Create a "safe" and "comfortable" (familiar cultural context) environment for students in order to encourage them to take risks. They need to learn how to make mistakes as a learning process without feeling ashamed.

Ways to help

Provide workshops in Spanish, using life-experience situations.

Talk about topics of immediate interest.

Use humour in a very holistic way to relax and motivate students.

Empower non-power groups (i.e., women, racial minorities, people with disabilities, and the socio-economically disadvantaged).

Open up a forum with a view to overturn misconceptions. e.g.

"You go to the shrink if you are losing your head."

"If your wife learns English she will become liberated and independent"

"If you meet a group of women you will become a lesbian"

Teaching materials should be based on learners' experiences so that they can relate and transfer cultural values.

Educate them about values based on the "Charter of Rights and Freedoms".

Learners need to recognize that general knowledge is important for personal growth.

People who are involved in working with these learners should understand the cultural, social and economic differences between developed and underdeveloped countries.

There is a lack of information about the language programs suitable for the kind of learners discussed in this paper. Some people such as counsellors, instructors and other services providers are not aware of the extent of the challenges these people face, and some of them try to cover this situation up because they think that most of the Latin-American immigrants and refugees do not face these kind of challenges. They do not try to refer clients to the organizations that are working in this field because they do not think these programs help their clients . They are not aware of, or they do not believe, the severe predicament refugees find themselves in this country. Their indifference blocks them from sharing information and referring people to the appropriate agencies working with these refugees.

Learners subordinate too quickly because they see the instructor as a powerful person. We must structure our program in a way that we give them the leadership.

SUCCESSES

The following cases show how students want to take control of their lives. The only thing they need is the opportunity to do that.

"Patricia" was a housewife in her country. She came as a Landed Immigrant in 1988 with her four children and her old father. She studied up to grade 6. She attended ESL classes for three years with very little progress. Finally she was registered in a Spanish Program. During the course her self-esteem increased so much that she went out and found a job from 5 - 12 p.m. Monday to Friday as a cleaner. She also went to school every day, and she looked after her family. Her attendance was excellent. After six months she was promoted to LINC 2 high.

"Elisa" went to school up to grade 3. She lived in the United States for seven years. She came to Canada in 1987. At that time she spoke English well but she did not have any writing or reading skills in either Spanish or English. She worked in a restaurant immediately after arriving here, and then in a factory until she was laid-off. She registered herself in a Spanish class, when she was on maternity leave with her second child. She had an excellent memory. She was very competitive and very supportive of the class. When an issue came up for discussion in the class, she made intelligent and relevant comments. Her class interaction was very good. She had excellent motivation and good self-esteem. She had to travel one hour to go to school with her two children. She was promoted to Level II, and then she was promoted to LINC unilingual Program Level III.

"Julia", did not know how to hold a pencil because she did not attend school in her country of origin. She was registered in the First Language (Spanish) Program. Her attendance was irregular. She was very emotional and she had very poor self esteem and poor self-control. Sometimes, she was very disruptive in class. She was very conscious that she was not at the same level as the other learners and she did not want to do the exercises that would help her. After a period of time, her oral English improved rapidly, as well as her self esteem, and there was a big improvement in her class interaction and tolerance. Her behaviour improved to the point where she could not recognize herself. After three years she found a full-time job and right now she has an extra part-time job. She always refers students to the centre.

"Miguel" was a Landed Immigrant. He had grade 2. He obtained a job in construction one week after he arrived. He attended night school when it was possible. However he got laid-off and he was referred to the CMLC during the day and in the evenings he attended night school. He was very responsible, and worked very hard in class. His progress had been extraordinary. But he needed to spent more time in Spanish classes because his problem was lack of general knowledge. He was very ambitious and he wanted to attend high school. He finished LINC level III and he started to work again in construction at the same firm where he worked before. His co-workers were amazed to see how fast he learned how to communicate in English.

"Antonio" left his country when he was fourteen to escape induction into the guerilla army. He lived in Mexico first and then in Los Angeles, California, where he spent eight months in detention. He came to Canada as a Landed Immigrant and he worked almost steadily after his arrival. He registered in Spanish class because he never had any formal training in reading, writing or grammar. He was working as a volunteer in an organization that helps newcomers to Canada and he was determined to become a social worker. He speaks English fluently. He was promoted to LINC Level II.

"Eduardo" had no schooling. He worked as a farmer in his country of origin. He left his country and emigrated to Mexico where he stayed for eight years. He came to Canada as a Landed Immigrant and he took ESL classes before Spanish classes because he resisted the idea of becoming literate in Spanish. After a year he registered in the Spanish Program and he made significant progress.

Afterwards, he found a job, a six- month seasonal contract to work on a farm, and when the season was finished he returned to the program. Now he continues in both the First Language Literacy Program and the ESL Literacy Program. At the beginning his social interaction was very poor. He was very shy. He never looked up from his book during the lesson. Now he interacts well and is very understanding with his classmates. He has developed a good sense of humour. He can even endure teasing with good humour.

A strong, well-organized woman who has a thriving business with a fairly large number of employees. Although "Gloria" never went to school and never studied mathematics, she became adept at handling the financial side of her business. Most of the transactions were handled verbally. When she came to Canada, however, she knew that before she could become established here she would have to learn English. This is the way she talks about her school experience in ESL classrooms: "I used to come out of the classroom and cry all the way home. Then my children would come home and say, ' let's go back home, Mom. We do not understand anything in this school'. And I, after sitting in a classroom all day without understanding anything. It was harder for me because I did not even know how to write the letters. When the teacher said, 'Say, I am.' I did not know what 'I am' was in my own language. So how was I supposed to understand?". Having already had some schooling in El Salvador, this student's children learned English very quickly in the public school system but she, during the year and a half she spent in an ESL class, was unable to learn to use even the simple language forms being taught in the basic level class. After she enrolled in Spanish class, she learned the alphabet and how to form the letters and write words in just a few weeks. She progressed rapidly and she learned how to form sentences and the parts of speech and their use. She can compose a paragraph in Spanish and can read poems and write a fairly complicated sentence from dictation. Her self-esteem has improved dramatically and she says she can 'feel her brain expanding'. Now that she was started to take formal ESL lessons, Gloria is excited, motivated and confident that she can become literate in English.

Conclusion

People who are working with refugees from Central America should take a more active role in advocating for these people. They should be more involved in making the system aware of the need to create and implement more programs.

The acquisition of literacy skills in their first language gives adults a sense of achievement because these skills allow them to share their experiences, as well as to talk about difficult topics with confidence. It gives them the opportunity to build a new network of friends and a great opportunity to express personal experiences and to share their knowledge. First they need to learn how to use their own language in order to explain their reality, and second to learn how to read and write English.

The learners need English in order to fully integrate into this society and to act together for

social change. Literacy is more than reading and writing. Literacy is learning how to solve problems in society, within the family (abuse), racism, discrimination, sexism, classism, homophobia, feelings of hate. Popular education empowers learners to be critical

Finally, they must exercise their right to vote in a democratic country in order to make a difference for themselves in Canada.

WHERE TO FIND FURTHER INFORMATION

- **FIRST LANGUAGE LITERACY (other than English or French) IN METROPOLITAN TORONTO.** by Manuel Pinto (1990)
  A Research Paper submitted in conformity with the requirements for the Degree of Master of Education in the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education.

- **First Before Second - The Importance of First Language in Literacy.** By Tom Loebel. (1993) Toronto Board of education and the City of Toronto.

- **The Importance of First Language Literacy in the Acquisition of a Second Language** by Dorothy Bogdan 1995

- **Peace, WHAT peace?** by Inter-church Committee on Human Rights in Latin-America. 1997.